FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 18, No. 3, Art. 10
September 2017

A Journey to the Centre of Self: Positioning the Researcher in Autoethnography

Jayne Pitard

Key words: positioning; autoethnography; teaching; Timor Leste; ontology; epistemology; methodology; reflexivity

Abstract: For a reader to trust the perspective of ~~a~~ researcher as presented in qualitative inquiry, the disclosure of the researcher's position in relation to the data is vital. *Who am I in relation to the research?* becomes the central tenet in disclosing the positioning of the researcher. I contend that what we know (ontology), and how we know it (epistemology), are a result of our philosophical beliefs developed through our lifelong learning and not a precursor to them. In seeking to understand my philosophical positioning when researching my teaching a group of professionals from Timor Leste, I have found it helpful to answer four questions. What do I believe underpins my knowledge of life? Where did I gain this belief? How does this belief influence the way I react to situations and people? How do the assumptions, which I have accumulated from my life experiences, affect my reflexivity in my research? This article describes the process that I have used to reveal my position in relation to the data using examples from my autoethnography.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Within the expanding world of qualitative inquiry, an acknowledgement of the researcher's positioning through a process of reflexivity (critical self-evaluation) has become essential (GLESNE, 1999; MAUTHNER & DOUCET, 2003; MERRIAM, 1998; RUSSELL & KELLY, 2002; STAKE, 1995; WATT, 2007; WILLIG, 2001). BERGER (2013) contends that positioning refers to how researchers view themselves in relation to the research and the data; their understanding of self in the creation of knowledge. Beyond the seemingly apparent concepts of race, gender, age and education, the positionality of the

researcher in relation to the data is based upon philosophical beliefs and assumptions accumulated throughout a lifetime which inhabit the unknowing mind of the researcher. Listening to our internal dialogue relies upon that dialogue being spontaneous, springing from a stillness of mind which allows our past experience to guide our present. The examination of this internal dialogue can reveal stimuli from our past experiences which we carry with us still. I use examples from my research of teaching a group of students from a culturally different background to highlight my findings. [1]

In 2012/2013 on behalf of my university I delivered a Graduate Certificate in Vocational Education and Training (GCVET) to a group of twelve Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) professionals from Timor Leste (TL). I travelled to TL initially to meet the students and gain an understanding of the TVET system in TL after which the students studied on campus in Melbourne for three months. I returned to TL nine months later for their final assessment. My research seeks to understand the impact of cultural difference on the development of the teacher/student relationship. I had conducted a two part study, firstly from the perspective of myself as the teacher (autoethnography) and secondly from the perspective of the students (case study). This article refers to my autoethnography. [2]

My research was motivated by an interest in understanding how I responded to the cultural challenges of working with a group of students from a least developed country, and how these students responded to learning in a culture different from their own. The United Nations (UN) has criteria for defining least developed countries, among which are gross national income per capita, instability of agriculture production, instability of exports of goods and services, share of agriculture, forestry and fisheries in gross domestic product, under five mortality rate, adult literacy rates, secondary school enrolment ratio, percentage of population undernourished, and victims of war or invasion (UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND ANALYSIS DIVISION, 2015). These data are provided as an explanation of TL being included in UN and International Monetary Fund data as a least developed country. I am a 65 year old white, Australian female with 25 years of teaching practice but little experience teaching international students. I was forced to acknowledge my own inadequacies in teaching students whose life experience was in many ways more profound than mine. This was juxtaposed with my level of education, world travel and urban lifestyle, that placed me in a position of seeming to have skills to cope with the situation. I used autoethnography as a method of journeying to the centre of myself to explore my own anxieties when facing the cultural challenges of teaching these students. Autoethnography seeks to describe and analyse personal experience to gain an understanding of the cultural experience (ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2010). It allowed me the freedom of expression to explore my interpretation of my interactions with my students, understand the influence of my background, my historicality, on my interpretation, to promote understanding through disclosure. I kept a daily journal of my teaching and wrote vignettes to highlight existential moments. [3]

In order to emphasise my reflexive process, I developed a structured vignette analysis framework (PITARD, 2016) with six stages of analysis. I used a personal narrative discourse to create the *context*, then, to record as closely as possible the critical enquiry of the pre-reflective moment, I used *anecdotes* to capture the phenomena of emotions and sensations experienced as my own life experience, and unconscious assumptions, collided with a moment of cultural confrontation. I followed each of these anecdotes with an analytical exploration of my *emotional response* and *reflexivity*. The *strategies developed* as a result, and *concluding comments* highlight our group progression. [4]

In writing my autoethnography, I initially found the concept of positioning confusing. It was difficult to contend with the notion of who am I in relation to the research whilst coming to terms with the questions associated with *ontology* ("What kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?" [DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2011, p.12]), *epistemology* ("What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?" [ibid.]), and *methodology* ("How do we know the world or gain knowledge of it?" [ibid.]). In this article I, reveal my personal journey towards understanding how positioning myself in relation to my research became the first and most important understanding in my journey towards defining my methodology. A brief description of qualitative methodology is followed by my understanding of ontology and epistemology. I have created tables to highlight my progressive understanding as my research reading is expanding. Additionally, I have included a vignette to illustrate how the data is being shaped as the research proceeds. In introducing the practice of reflexivity, I begin to tackle the question of who am I in relation to the research. I address each of the four questions I had developed to reveal to myself how I framed my knowledge of life. I then investigate how my beliefs and assumptions may influence my research data and provide examples in several vignettes using my structured vignette analysis (PITARD, 2016). [5]

2. Qualitative Methodology

Methodology is the strategy (plan of action) for undertaking research, including how and what data are collected and analysed, and choice of methods. In qualitative methodology, researchers are encouraged to reflect on the values and objectives they bring to their research and how these affect the research project. RATNER (2002) argues that subjectivity guides everything from the choice of topic studied, to working conceptualisations, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data. CRESWELL (2013 [1998]) acknowledges that close links exist between the philosophy we bring to our research and how we develop our framework to proceed with the research. I came to understand that how I interpret the data relies on my personal philosophy, my beliefs and values, and this understanding led me to identify with an interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm. Paradigms are basic belief systems or worldviews based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. GUBA and LINCOLN (1994, p.115) discuss the "voice" in paradigm positions in modern research as:

- positivism and postpositivism (the inquirer's voice is that of the "disinterested scientist");
- critical theory (the inquirer's voice is that of the "transformative intellectual" (GIROUX, 1988 in GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994, p.115);
- constructivism (the inquirer's voice is that of the "passionate participant" (LINCOLN, 1991 in GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994, p.115). [6]

According to GUBA and LINCOLN it is the ontological position that most differentiates constructivism from the other paradigms. In constructivism (also referred to as interpretivism**)**, knowledge is created in interaction between the inquirer (researcher) and the researched. I prefer HEIDEGGER's concept of co-constitutionality in hermeneutic phenomenology (1962 [1927]), which focuses on seeking out the meanings of individual experiences and how these meanings influence the choices made. Within a hermeneutic phenomenological study, my two-part (teacher and students), dual method (autoethnography and case study) conceptual framework was appropriate, where the meanings arrived at by the researcher are a merging of the meanings articulated by both participant and researcher within the focus of the inquiry (KOCH, 1995), Given my research explored the *development* of the teacher-student relationship, rather than seeking a purely descriptive interpretation, a hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological (study of the lived experience) approach allowed exploration of how my ongoing choices influenced the development of the relationship. Thus my practice and theory were linked in a continuous progression of critical reflection and transformation (SCHWANDT, LINCOLN & GUBA, 2007). In doing so, I had to examine my historically held prejudices and alter those that might disable my efforts to understand both myself and my students. I explored multiple realities through a reflexive process to interpret my experiences. It was an evolving process over time for me to understand that my positioning as a researcher would need to be illuminated to myself before I could truly understand my ontological and epistemological standing; however I will start with my initial encounter with ontology and epistemology. [7]

2.1 Understanding ontology and epistemology

According to HIGGS and TREDE (2009), ontology (the nature of the world and what we can know about it) is socially constructed, dialogued, experienced or perceived by people. It asks researchers to use words and images to describe and interpret experiences and perceptions of their lived worlds. GUBA and LINCOLN (1994) explain that constructivism's approach to ontology includes "multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based" (p.110). I came to understand that our knowledge, beliefs and understandings of external realities are only knowable through the human mind and socially constructed meanings of dialogue and experiences (SNAPE & SPENCER, 2003). [8]

Epistemology is an element of philosophy concerned with the nature of knowing (how one comes to know) (HOFER 2004). "This involves thinking about the nature of knowledge itself, about its scope and about the validity and reliability of

claims to knowledge" (WILLIG, 2001, p.2). Postmodern research paradigms acknowledge the transient and ephemeral nature of reality (RUSSELL & KELLY, 2002) while promoting mindfulness of the interpersonal relationships that ultimately shape and define our experience. An interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm assumes the researcher and the social world impact on each other and findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective and values (SNAPE & SPENCER, 2003). This understanding confirmed my epistemological stance of interpetivism/constructivism with a central goal of seeking to interpret the social world of myself and my students (HIGGS, 2001). [9]

Interestingly, there is a longstanding philosophical argument about whether the nature of learning should be included in the definition of personal epistemology (HOFER, 2004). For example, HOFER and PINTRICH (1997), and SANDOVAL (2005) believe personal epistemology should include views about the nature of knowledge and knowing but not views about the nature of learning. In contrast, ELBY (2009) argues "personal epistemology" should not exclude views about the nature of learning but that "it is more productive for the community *not* to converge on a definition until further empirical and theoretical progress points us toward the best way to carve cognitive structures at their joints" (p.146). I believe the nature of learning should be part of our epistemological stance because what we unconsciously choose to ignore in our learning affects how we know what we know. At this stage I developed a diagram to guide my understanding (Figure 1 below).

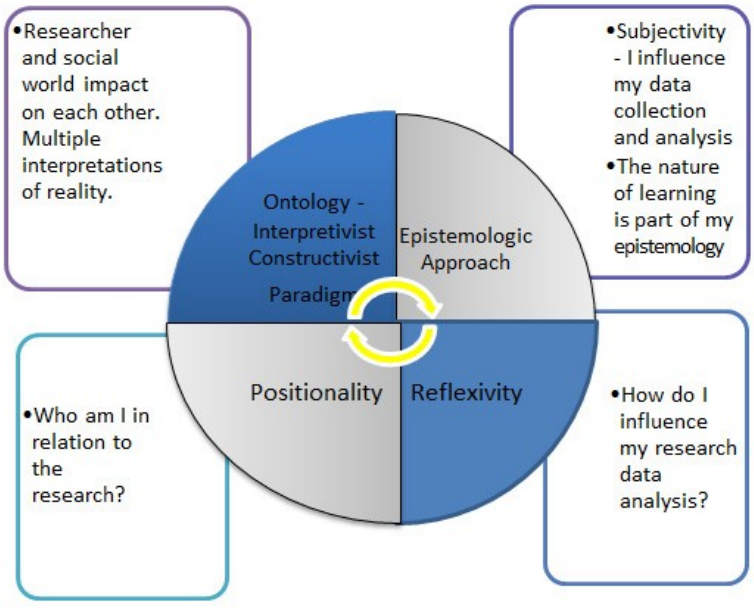

Figure 1: My research paradigm [10]

As the researcher, I was also the teacher, and through interacting with my students, I was inevitably influenced by my perspective and values thus making it impossible for me to have conducted objective, value free research. The interpretivist/constructivist paradigm posits that researchers' values are intrinsic in all phases of the research process and that the findings of the research emerge through the dialogue that takes place between the researcher and the researched

(COHEN & CRABTREE, 2006). Indeed, GUBA and LONCOLN (1994) propose that under an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm the researcher and the research participants are assumed to be interactively connected so that the data are literally shaped as the research proceeds. When an action is completed and the researcher lens is turned back on it as part of the reflexive process, its meaning will be modified. It is impossible to separate cause from effect, as all entities are in a state of simultaneous shaping (LINCOLN & GUBA, 1985). In this way the conventional distinction between ontology and epistemology all but disappears. [11]

To enhance my understanding of my ontological and epistemological stances I created the following tables (Tables 2 and 3 below).

Ontology researchers	**The nature of the world and what we can know about it**	**My positionality**
GUBA and LINCOLN (1994)	Constructivism's approach to ontology includes "multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based" (p.110).	I understand our reality is only knowable through our minds and our socially constructed meanings of dialogue and experiences.
HIGGS and TREDE (2009)	Reality is socially constructed. Asks researchers to use words to describe experiences and perceptions of lived world.	I describe my experiences with my students. They describe their experiences with me. These experiences will be different.
SNAPE and SPENCER (2003)	Reality is only known through socially constructed meaning.	I understand our collective reality will be known through socially constructed meaning.

Table 1: Ontological stance

Epistemology researchers	**How we can know about reality**	**My positionality**
BERGER (2013)	Researchers need to carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs and experiences through practice of reflexivity.	I must emphasise reflexivity as a process rather than a single action.
COHEN and CRABTREE (2006)	Researchers' values are intrinsic, findings emerge through dialogue.	Truth is negotiated through dialogue.

Epistemology researchers	**How we can know about reality**	**My positionality**
DERVIN (2003)	Context is a process. Attention must be given to change over time, to emergent and fluid patterns.	I turn the research lens back on myself to understand the process.
HIGGS (2001)	Reality is constructed inter-subjectively through interpretivism.	I assume I, as the researcher, and the social world created through interacting with students impact on, and influence one another
LINCOLN and GUBA (1985)	Impossible to separate cause from effect as all entities are in a state of simultaneous shaping.	The process will stimulate our simultaneous shaping.
PENG and NISBETT (1999)	The dialectical process allows a community with different cultural backgrounds to come to an understanding of their social world.	Our different cultural backgrounds can bring change to both parties in a dialogue depending on the interaction and the context.
PICKARD (2007)	Interpretivism seeks to understand the entire context both micro and macro.	I seek meaning in the actions of individuals and the group.
SNAPE and SPENCER (2003)	An interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm assumes the researcher and the social world impact on each other and findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective and values.	I cannot separate myself from what I know. My research will be influenced by what I know.
RUSSELL and KELLY (2002)	Acknowledge transient nature of reality while being mindful of the interpersonal relationships that ultimately shape and define our experience.	My values and perspectives will influence my relationships with my students and vice versa.
	Reflexivity also allows researchers to become aware of what inhibits their seeing or knowing.	I must be aware of my assumptions to allow for deeper analysis to illuminate what is not being seen.

Epistemology researchers	**How we can know about reality**	**My positionality**
WATT (2007)	Use of reflexivity is deemed essential because researcher is primary instrument of data collection.	Autoethnography centres me as the researcher in the story so reflexivity is essential.

Table 2: Epistemological stance [12]

The following excerpt from one of my vignettes illustrates the researcher and the researched in dialogue, the data being shaped as the research proceeds.

Context:

I had not anticipated that some students would speak very little English and would not understand much of what I said. Waiting for an answer from any student to a question required patience. I understood that they had to digest the question and mentally translate it into their native language (Tetun), search their minds for the answer, then translate the answer back into English before it could be verbalised. My fatigue and culture shock prevented me from conceiving an outright strategy for dealing with the language barrier, but a night spent contemplating the students' needs and analysing the task I had set for myself opened my mind to possibility. As I entered the classroom the following Monday my mind was open to developing a strategy, however I hadn't actually decided what that strategy would be. I was hoping it would somehow evolve and manifest itself to me through my teaching.

Anecdote:

As I speak I see a frown appear on her forehead. I am acutely aware I am engaging only half my audience as I scan the other faces. Most are intent on deciphering my Australian accented English although some seem relaxed, understanding. When I have finished my monologue the usual contributors are involved in the ensuing discussion. I pause, thinking about how important this discussion is to the learning outcomes of the course. I feel frustrated that I'm reaching only half of them. I address the most proficient English speaker with a demonstrated understanding of the learning taking place. I ask him to come to the front of the group and explain in his native tongue what I just said. Hesitantly he translates a difficult concept as he speaks in Tetun. Faces light up. Discussion commences. I watch in wonder. I have just developed my most useful strategy for dealing with the language barrier—co-teaching.

Emotional response:

Great weights lift off my shoulders as I watch the student at the front of the room speaking animatedly in Tetun. Responsibility shifts as realisation dawns that I have resources sitting in my classroom that I have not yet considered. I have felt so overwhelmed by the language barrier that I have questioned my own professionalism and my ability to facilitate any worthwhile learning for this group.

Reflexivity:

The weight of responsibility for teaching these students has blocked my mind to a solution. My practice of listening for answers within my own consciousness supports me

on this day. I have no plan for dealing with this issue but once I understand how to introduce a practice regularly used by me with other groups of students, I feel exuberant. However the question remains—why did not this teaching practice occur in my conscious mind? Who did I not trust because of the language barrier—them or me? My experience of co-teaching with my Australian students allows me to hear and understand what is being said, giving me the opportunity to address issues of misinformation and misinterpretation. The leap of faith I have to take with the Timorese both elates me for its boldness and scares me for its possibility of not serving the students well. I have to trust their earnestness for learning; their desire to get it right, to take home to TL the skills to change their country through education. This might not extend to every student, but I am confident the students I choose to assist through co-teaching possess these qualities.

Strategies developed:

The students relax and the sound of chatter soon fills the room. I ask them to form into three groups of four comprising two whose English is better and two whose English is poor. Their inherent understanding of their own levels of English helps them to achieve this without my intervention. Together these groups work to ensure the learning is happening, asking questions and seeking understanding from their fellow students.

Vignette 1: Bridging the language dilemma [13]

It is through the dialectical process (the tolerance for holding apparently contradictory beliefs (PENG & NISBETT, 1999) that members of a community with different cultural backgrounds come to an understanding of their social world. Truth is negotiated through dialogue and the context of that dialogue is vital to the shaping of the data. The researcher and the participants are both changed by the experience and the new knowledge is a result of this interaction, bound by both the timing of the interaction and the context in which the interaction took place. DERVIN (2003) proposes context as a focus on process, "attention to process, to change over time, to emergent and fluid patterns" (p.116). Context becomes known when the researcher turns the research lens back on the researcher. Interpretivism/constructivism manifests understanding of the meanings behind the actions of individuals and therefore seeks to understand "the entire context, at both the macro and micro environmental level" (PICKARD, 2007, p.13). The example provided above relies on the context of the classroom, the language barrier, the reluctance of the students to tell me, their teacher that they could not comprehend what I was saying, my own inexperience in teaching international students and my mistrust of their learning if I could not hear it. [14]

2.2 Understanding positioning through reflexivity

The practice of reflexivity throughout the research process highlights the importance of declaring and taking responsibility for our positioning as researchers. CROMBY and NIGHTINGALE (1999) differentiate between two distinct types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. Personal reflexivity involves considering how our own values, life experiences and assumptions have influenced the research. Epistemological reflexivity requires us to consider how our research design may have limited or influenced the research,

and how we could have done it differently. It encourages us to reflect on our epistemological assumptions about our knowledge of the world, and the implications of these assumptions on our research. Thus we find that in addressing reflexivity within our research, we must look both ways—at our own values, life experiences and beliefs, and also at the trustworthiness and rigor of our research design and methodology, all of which are governed by our assumptions. In my research I had a dual role of researcher and teacher so it was imperative to carefully self-monitor the impact of my own experiences and assumptions (BERGER, 2013) by turning the researcher lens back on myself (DAVIES, 1999). I had to take responsibility for my position as both teacher and researcher by acknowledging that it was impossible for me to remain outside of my research (WILLIG, 2001), as I was influencing the dialectical process (PENG & NISBETT, 1999) through my dialogue as the teacher. [15]

The researchers' ability to know another depends inherently on their ability to know themselves. ~~Q~~uestions such as who am I now, who have I been in the past, how have I progressed my knowledge of self, may give an insight into how we approach our representation of the data (COFFEY, 1999; GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004; PILLOW, 2003). I had difficulty relating to these questions so I developed my own to assist me in understanding what assumptions I consistently make about life and how these assumptions determine the knowledge that I accumulate (which learning have I chosen to ignore?). These four questions are: What do I believe underpins my knowledge of life? Where did I gain this belief? How does this belief influence the way I react to situations and people? What assumptions have I accumulated from my life experiences which may affect my reflexivity to social interaction? I address each of these questions separately. [16]

3. Who Am I in Relation to the Research?

3.1 What do I believe underpins my knowledge of life?

As a teacher and researcher I come from a position of deep reflection on how I interact with my world. I believe that every lived experience has an impact on our consciousness and that the way we interpret that experience will shape how we react to our lived experiences in the future. If we think about our experiences in purely an intellectual way we miss the opportunity of awareness, of understanding at a deeper level how this experience has impacted our being. I believe that awareness *beyond thinking* allows us to come closer to a truth that might lie beyond individual versions of the truth. [17]

3.2 Where did I gain this belief?

My understanding of self has been enhanced through extended reading of philosophical and spiritual works by philosophers, psychotherapists and theologians who have the clarity of mind to present in words: the nature of the world, and what we can know about it (ontology). [18]

Albert EINSTEIN (1935) said a person experiences his-/herself, the thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest of the universe. He posits that reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one and that the only real valuable thing is intuition. A person starts to live when he/she can live outside him-/herself. Anthony DE MELLO (1990), an Indian Jesuit priest and psychotherapist, spoke of a person's *concept* of a thing or an event as being static, whereas *reality* is constantly in flux and the moment we observe reality, it is already changing. The moment we put things into a concept, they stop changing or flowing and become static. Having a concept of what we believe reality is inhibits the intuition of humans in continually observing the world around us and within us. This idea of having a concept of reality is identified with the thinking mind, the illusory self, the unconscious or unobserved self. Eckart TOLLE, a modern German/Canadian philosopher says that thinking is only a tiny aspect of the consciousness that we are (TOLLE, 2005). The thinking mind develops a concept of reality that is an illusion, as reality is constantly changing. That illusion of reality then becomes the basis for all further interpretations, or rather misinterpretations of reality. In summary, EINSTEIN, MELLO and TOLLE all believe that reality is an illusion created by the thinking self and unless we can learn to live outside the experience which creates our illusion of reality, we will always be trapped inside it, thereby inhibiting our intuition. I strive to open myself beyond concepts, beyond thinking, in the hope of experiencing the world from a depth of unconscious feeling with the ultimate purpose of perceiving not just my own but other people's interpretations of reality. I strive to adopt an intuitive approach to my life and to my teaching. I present the following extract from one of my vignettes as an example.

Context:

In my preparation for students from TL, I had determined that appointing each student a mentor within their industry area would be a crucial factor of success for the students, particularly because of their language and conceptual difficulties (particularly conceptualising skills and modern processes in their industry or policy area). My attempts to match the students with a mentor were initially based on the work role of each student in TL, but as many students were unable to provide a job description for their role as their tasks and obligations were either unclear to them or they did not have the language to express them, it was apparent to me that I had to be intuitive in choosing mentors for these students.

Anecdote:

He is gentle, thin, young and sensitive. He is skilled in English. He has studied theology and is the principal of a Catholic training college in Dili. This is his first visit to Australia. At the beginning he smiles a lot. As time progresses his smiles are more fleeting. He is troubled.

I match him with an associate director at the university who himself has been the director of a secondary training college, although his current position within the university is not related to this. This mentor has studied philosophy, is gentle, wise and sensitive and has worked with disconnected young people. He takes the student into his home for dinner, discusses many aspects of life with him. The smile returns. Though no problems have

been solved and no workplace visited, a soul has been listened to, nurtured, guided. This is a flourishing match.

Emotional response:

I care about the emotional wellbeing of my students. Although this has always been so, I was surprised at the force behind my need to ensure the emotional and spiritual welfare of these students from TL. The mother in me (I have three adult children) recognised what I perceived from my experience to be overwhelming loneliness, stemming from the loss of all that is familiar. I felt anxious for them; I wanted to make them better.

Reflexivity:

My intuitive professional judgement of the needs of individual students assisted me to discern whether their prevailing needs were academic, physical or emotional. I was their carer as well as their teacher. Some were capable of providing for their own needs but a couple seemed lost. I was at my most nurturing when confronted with these few students but I didn't have the strength or time to provide for their needs myself. Nor would it have been appropriate. They needed a third party to whom they could speak in confidence about their daily lives as students. Finding suitable mentors for these students filled me with as much joy as if I had been able to nurture them myself. In turning the lens back on myself I acknowledged my own experience of confrontation and overwhelming emotional stress in having sole responsibility for teaching these students. I often experienced professional loneliness. This practice of reflexivity allowed me to open myself to understanding their distress. I was in a position myself of having high expectations placed upon me by the university whilst doubting I had the skills or endurance to fulfil these expectations. I aligned myself to these students by acknowledging my own emotional needs and understood they too needed emotional support.

Strategies developed:

Students with poor English skills and those facing spiritual crises imposed by the way of life and standard of living they were experiencing in Melbourne, needed extra care. Coming to terms with leaving Timor and experiencing cultural difference created spiritual and emotional dilemmas that increasingly became evident to me through student behaviours. A young mother who had left her children in the care of her husband and extended family became increasingly silent. Some students struggled to be present intellectually within the group in class time, falling asleep in the middle of the day. Rest periods became important for all. Those with strong Catholic affiliations sought comfort in local Catholic rituals and communities and some sought relief in local expat Timorese communities. I remained sensitive to the fact that communication with loved ones in Timor was difficult due to the lack of internet access in TL. I started listening to my internal dialogue which warned me these students were experiencing emotional crises which could not be ignored. Instead of matching all students with mentors based on job roles, I identified students with more complex needs and matched them with mentors within the university that I had worked with over the years who had demonstrated to me superior skills in reflexivity and profound thinking. An understanding of the power of reflexivity makes a mentor more open to listening beyond the spoken word.

Vignette 2: The role of intuition in the art of choosing a mentor [19]

3.3 How does this belief influence the way I react to situations and people?

DENZIN (2009), referring to ARGYRIS and SCHON, states "the storytelling self that is presented is always one attached to an interpretive perspective, an 'espoused theory' … that gives the writer a public persona" (p.89). To practise reflexivity, I have consistently used the term “espoused theory” throughout the teaching and research. So I teach the theory of practice as well as strive to practice the theory through double loop learning. ARGYRIS and SCHON developed a framework that explained the cognitive structure and processes of problem solving that people engage in, based on their world view and assumptions. They assert that people develop maps in their heads about how to plan, implement and review their actions and are unaware of the inconsistency of the theories they actually do use (ARGYRIS 1980).

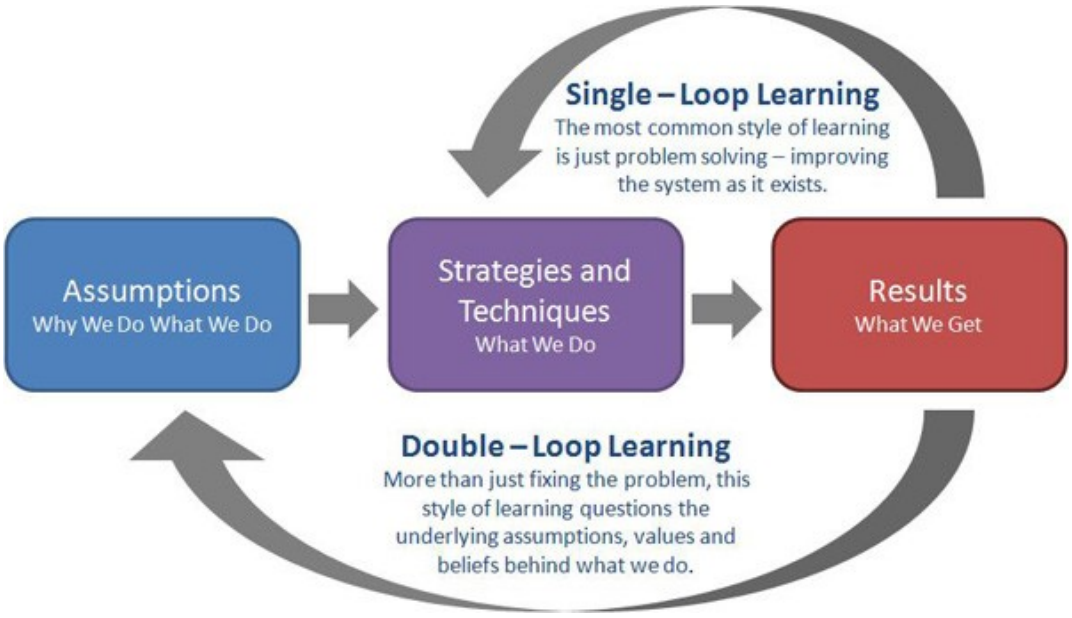

Figure 2: A model of ARGYRIS' and SCHON's "double loop learning" (BRYANT, 2009, n.p.). [20]

ARGYRIS and SCHON propose that most people undertake single loop learning when they reflect on their actions without examining what assumptions their actions are based on. Experience previously then based on the individual's core assumptions about this situation, the individual will take a particular action to explain, predict or control the situation or outcome. It is in the examination of the underlying or unconscious assumptions which predict the action taken that double loop learning occurs. ARGYRIS developed the ladder of inference (Figure 3) in 1990 as a tool used to help people recognise their tendency to make claims about the world that they assume to be true, and, therefore, expect others to accept without question.

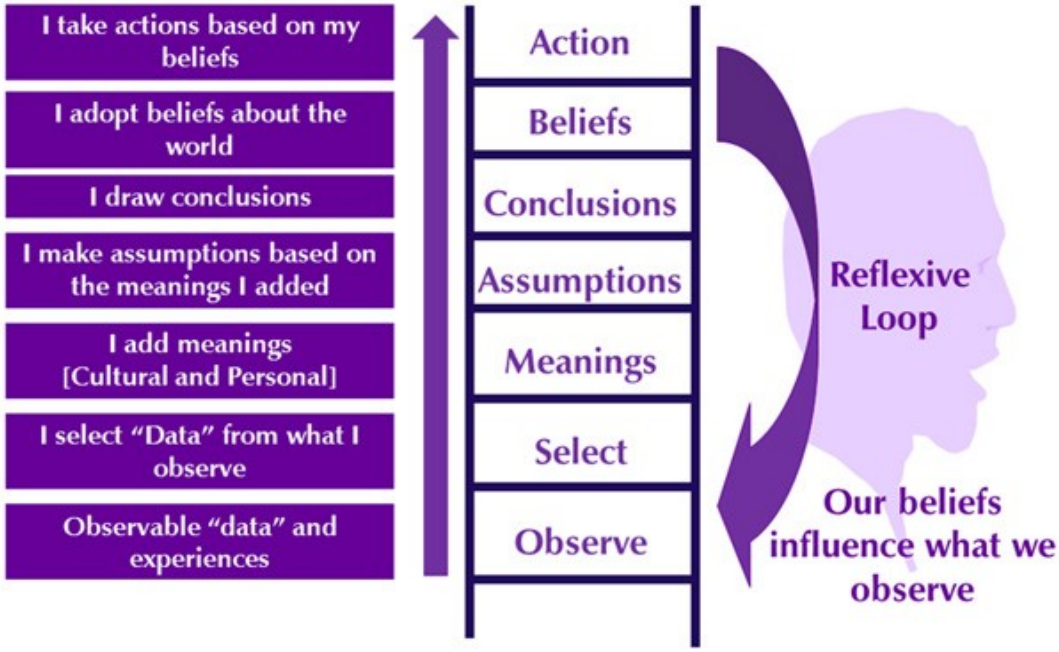

Figure 3: A model of ARGYRIS' "ladder of inference" (YATES, 2011, n.p.) [21]

The observable data is shared data—what is seen and experienced by everyone involved in the experience. At the second rung, people select which data they will carry forward to the next level of adding meaning to the experience. As an example: on my first day teaching the students from TL, I engaged them in a walk and talk activity where they had to break into pairs and tell their story to their partner. They were required to listen for ten minutes without interruption and without taking notes. When the group reconvened, I asked for volunteers to relay their partner's story to the class. The first volunteer told of his fellow student losing members of his family during the occupation of TL by Indonesia, during which twenty-five per cent of the population had been killed. The student telling the story started to cry. I experienced overwhelming panic that I was intruding into the group's privacy by asking them to recall events too difficult to think about. I observed the student crying and *assumed* he was experiencing trauma at recalling these events. This led me to cease the activity and never to mention these events to the students again. In taking this observable data without testing it with the students, I missed an opportunity to cohere the group through the sharing of their experiences. In a focus group conducted at the completion of their study, they told me they did not understand why I ceased the activity, as they were enjoying the exchange of stories. What an opportunity missed! My observable data concentrated on the distress of the student telling the story. The students' observable data was not the student's distress, but a story of shared trauma. Double loop learning involves returning to the observable data of our experience to distinguish what data we have selected to take forward and what it is in our personal and cultural life experiences which affect how we add meaning to that data. As a child I was taught to be embarrassed by deep emotional outpouring. In thinking about what data I took forward in this instance, I am

reminded that I grew up in an era (1950s) where probing was inhibited by religion, by figures of authority, and where atrocious acts of social injustice were swept under the carpet. The TL students and I had concentrated on different observable data, and the further up the ladder we went, the further apart our interpretation of the experience became until I finally reached the rung of action and ceased the activity. This depth of analysis is required to understand our theory in use (how we *actually* responded) and compare it to our espoused theory (how we would like to have responded or how we *believe* we responded). [22]

MEZIROW's transformation as critical reflection theory (1990) also guided my reflexivity. According to MEZIROW reflection enables us to detect and correct exaggerations in our beliefs and misrepresentations in our problem solving, and critical reflection involves a "critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (p.1). Through critical reflection we undertake a process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which underpins further interpretation in future experiences. This process promotes the development of expectations that "constitute our frame of reference" (ibid.) similar to the assumptions described by ARGYRIS. Personal constructs of past experience determine the way we interpret lived experience which in turn will re-enforce our assumptions. MEZIROW differentiates between active interpretation and reflective interpretation by emphasising the examination of the underlying assumptions or meaning perspectives in the reflective interpretation of the lived experience. He states that "reflection on presuppositions is what we mean by critical reflection" (1990, p.6). [23]

3.4 How do assumptions I have accumulated from my life experiences affect my reflexivity in my research?

This is where I answer the question *Who am I in relation to the research?* Careful critical reflection of my reactions to experiences requires moments of stillness to listen to the internal dialogue that relates to the experience and will reveal to me what assumptions I have carried forward from previous similar experiences. I must listen to and identify the memories and ideas which flow around the central theme of the data. [24]

An incident occurred during my teaching of the students that highlights the importance of rigor in turning the lens back on the researcher. Had I not done so I may have allowed my position as teacher and researcher, in a perceived position of power, to change the experience of study in Australia for a student.

Context:

I had been teaching the students for two weeks and I was experiencing culture shock at the realisation of the deficit in their English language skills, underpinning knowledge and critical thinking skills. The culture shock they were experiencing manifested in their low levels of energy and worried faces. A male student in his late thirties who I had noticed being consistently teased by his Timorese colleagues for ogling young women, approached me after class.

Anecdote:

His dark skin glows as he earnestly reveals he has been fined by the transit police for not swiping his prepaid transport card at the station before boarding the train into the city. I ask him to slow down his heavily accented speech so I can more fully understand what he is telling me. He rolls his eyes in his effort to repeat the terrible news that he has received a fine of $200 and would I please help him because he does not have the money to pay this fine. I ask questions to clarify details. I know there is no ticketed public transport system in TL and I know this is his first travel outside TL. He has been in Australia for two weeks. His agitation causes beads of perspiration to form on his forehead and upper lip. I know he does not have the money to pay this fine. "I will see what I can do". The following Monday morning he approaches me again and I feel dismayed I have not taken any action on this matter. When he approaches me a week later I feel ashamed I still have not taken any action and immediately write a letter to the public transit authority on behalf of the university, outlining his unfamiliarity with a ticketed public transport system and his lack of experience in other cultures. "Have you received a letter yet?" "Do you know if I have to pay this fine?" His agitation continues until the response is received rescinding the fine. His smile reaches across his face.

Emotional response:

I felt weighed down by the slow dawning of the enormous responsibility I had undertaken in agreeing to teach these students from TL at a post-graduate level. I felt overwhelmed and alone. This student added to my burden of responsibility and even though I knew he had no-one else to assist him, I resented the fact he asked more of me. He asked me to advocate on his behalf with a legal authority. I wanted him to solve his own problem. I resented his lack of knowledge and experience.

Reflexivity:

It took me two weeks to initiate the letter and my hesitation in helping this student caused me to question my underlying assumptions. He had not given me any reason to believe he had deliberately tried to get a free ride on the train. I had unconsciously based my assumption of his guilt on the fact that he was a man who was teased by his colleagues for ogling young women. I had taken selected observable data and formed an assumption of untrustworthiness. My journal entry mentions his skin colour, rolling his eyes, beads of perspiration. Was I reacting to his physical appearance?

Strategies developed:

At the end of his course of study when I interviewed this student to collect data for my research, he revealed how absolutely terrified he was when apprehended by the transit police. He explained his lack of experience with ticketed public transport meant he genuinely forgot to swipe his card at the train station. Given most suburban train stations in Melbourne do not have barriers which demand a card be swiped, his explanation was

plausible. He revealed that his terror led to fears of being gaoled or evicted from Australia. I felt ashamed that I had doubted his integrity. I understood that I had allowed assumptions about him not respecting young women to influence my reaction to his plight. In addition, had I inherently allowed our cultural difference to interfere with my duty as his teacher? I took the time to stop and listen to my internal dialogue. A recollection of an incident came to mind experienced by me when I was 24 years old. I was being interviewed by a man in his mid-thirties for a work role.

Recollection:

His badly cut, wavy, blond hair frames a ruddy skinned face. Chubby fingers flip the top of his ball point pen incessantly. Over the desk his eyes roam down my legs and back up to my face. "You're an attractive girl. Do you have a boyfriend?" Startled, I flounder for a response. "Is that a wedding ring on your left hand?" A sleazy smirk. "Just because you've eaten doesn't mean you can't look at the menu." My stomach lurches with loathing and humiliation. I remain silent.

Vignette 3: Acknowledging the influence of past experience [25]

It was revealed to me through listening to my internal dialogue that the negative aspects of this experience remained with me still and influenced my reaction to the student in question. What additional assumptions have I carried with me in my interactions with other students? [26]

4. Conclusion

In navigating this journey into the centre of myself, I found the four questions posed in this article provided me with a useful tool to examine how my life accumulated assumptions have impacted my research. This examination was not restricted to conscious, recent events but extended to selections and patterns evident in my reflexivity. Awareness of internal dialogue and unconscious selection of data in my life experiences revealed layers of awareness that might otherwise remain experienced but concealed. Reflexivity, an essential element, requires for the researcher to take the time to be still, to listen to the internal dialogue and to probe for reactions that are stirred by experience with the data. I recently attended an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, of the painting Arrangement in Grey and Black. Portrait of the Artist's Mother, painted in 1871 by master artist James McNEILL WHISTLER. Over a period of one and a half hours I read, observed and listened to details revealing McNEILL WHISTLER's preparation for, and approach to, this painting, including his choice of background colours and patterns, the pose he chose to portray his mother, his use of simplicity for dramatic effect, his relationship with his mother, and his relationship with the world around him. Having understood his process in creating this work of art, the final product was impactful and moving. So it should be with qualitative inquiry and autoethnography in particular. Autoethnography intends to draw the reader into the workings of the social context studied thereby enhancing the readers own understanding and knowledge of the culture studied (connecting the personal to the cultural). The context of the research, the values of the researcher, and the assumptions carried through to the actions being researched,

deepen the impact of an autoethnography; thereby allowing others from both inside and outside a culture to become familiar with the characteristics that distinguish that culture. Revealing the positioning of the researcher in autoethnography therefore creates a collaborative journey between the author and the reader in understanding and knowing the culture studied. [27]

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge Professor Maureen RYAN, and Dr. Peter THOMAS for the integral role they played in helping me to understand positioning the researcher in autoethnography. A workshop conducted by Dr. Delwyn GOODRICK led me to develop the four questions recorded in this article. I am grateful to the students who participated in this research and I also thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their constructive comments. I take responsibility for any errors in the text.

References

Argyris, Chris (1980). *Inner contradictions of rigorous research.* New York: Academic Press.

Argyris, Chris & Schon, Donald A. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. Oxford: Jossey-Bass.

Berger, Roni (2013). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219-234.

Bryant, Andrew (2009). Reflecting and learning: 2009 to 2010. *Blog*, December 4, 2009, https://www.selfleadership.com/reflecting-and-leaning-2009-to-2010/ [Accessed: June 16, 2016].

Coffey, Amanda (1999). *The ethnographic self: Fieldwork and the representation of identity.* London: Sage.

Cohen, Deborah & Crabtree, Benjamin (2006). *Qualitative research guidelines project: The interpretivist paradigm,* http://www.qualres.org/HomeInte-3516.html [Accessed: November 16, 2016].

Creswell, John W. (2013 [1998]). *Qualitative enquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Cromby, John & Nightingale, David J. (1999). What's wrong with social constructionism? In David J. Nightingale & John Cromby (Eds.), *Social constructionist psychology: A critical analysis of theory and practice* (pp.1-19). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Davies, Charlotte (1999). *Reflexive ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others.* London: Routledge.

De Mello, Anthony (1990). *Awareness: The perils and opportunities of reality*. New York: Doubleday.

Denzin, Norman K. (2009). *Qualitative enquiry under fire: Toward a new paradigm dialogue*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Denzin, Norman K. & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (2011). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp.1-19). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dervin, Brenda (2003). Given a context by any other name: Methodological tools for taming the unruly beast. In Brenda Dervin, Lois Foreman-Wernet & Eric Lauterbach (Eds.), *Sense-making methodology reader: Selected writings of Brenda Dervin* (pp.111-132). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Elby, Andrew (2009). Defining personal epistemology: A response to Hofer & Pintrich (1997) and Sandoval (2005). *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *18*(1), 138-149.

Einstein, Albert (1935). *The world as I see it*. London: John Lane.

Ellis, Carolyn; Adams, Tony E. & Bochner, Arthur P. (2010). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *12*(1), Art. 10, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108 [Accessed: June 2, 2016].

Glesne, Corinne (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.

Guba, Egon G. & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp.105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Guillemin, Marilys & Gillam, Lynn (2004). Ethics, reflexivity and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *10*(2), 261-280.

Heidegger, Martin (1962 [1927]). *Being and time* (transl. by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson). New York: Harper and Row.

Higgs, Joy (2001). Charting standpoints in qualitative research. In Hilary Byrne-Armstrong, Joy Higgs & Debbie Horsfall (Eds.), *Critical moments in qualitative research* (pp.44-67). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Higgs, Joy & Trede, Franziska (2009). Framing research questions and writing philosophically. In Joy Higgs, Debbie Horsfall & Sandra Grace (Eds.), *Writing qualitative research on practice* (pp.13-26). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Hofer, Barbara K. (2004). Epistemological understanding as a metacognitive process: Thinking aloud during online searching. *Educational Psychologist*, *39*(1), 43-55, http://www4.ncsu.edu/~jlnietfe/Metacog_Articles_files/Hofer%202004.pdf [Accessed: June 19, 2016].

Hofer, Barbara K. & Pintrich, Paul R. (1997). The development of epistemological theories: Beliefs about knowledge and knowing and their relation to learning. *Review of Educational Research*, *67*, 88-140.

Koch, Tina (1995). Interpretive approaches in nursing research: The influence of Husserl and Heidegger. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *21*(5), 827-836.

Lincoln, Yvonna S. & Guba, Egon G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Mauthner, Natasha S. & Doucet, Andrea (2003). Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis. *Sociology*, *37*(3), 413-431, http://http-server.carleton.ca/~adoucet/pdfs/Mauthner_Doucet_Reflexivity_2003.pdf [Accessed: June 19, 2016].

Merriam, Sharan B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, Jack (1990). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. In Jack Mezirow (Ed.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp.1-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Peng, Kaipaing & Nisbett, Richard E. (1999). Culture, dialectics, and reasoning about contradiction. *American Psychologist*, *54*(9), 741-754.

Pickard, Alison J. (2007). *Research methods in information*. London: Facet.

Pillow, Wanda S. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure: The use of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *16*(2), 175-196.

Pitard, Jayne (2016). Using vignettes within autoethnography to explore layers of cross-cultural awareness as a teacher. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *17*(1), Art. 11, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1601119 [Accessed: June 19, 2016].

Ratner, Carl (2002). Subjectivity and objectivity in qualitative methodology. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *3*(3), Art. 16, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0203160 [Accessed: June 19, 2016].

Russell, Glenda M. & Kelly, Nancy H. (2002). Research as interacting dialogic processes: Implication for reflexivity. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *3*(3), Art. 18, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0203181 [Accessed: June 19, 2016].

Sandoval, William A. (2005). Understanding students' practical epistemologies and their influence on learning through inquiry. *Science Education*, *89*(4), 634-656.

Schwandt, Thomas; Lincoln, Yvonna S & Guba, Egon G. (2007). Judging interpretations: But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation, 114*, 11-25.

Snape, Dawn & Spencer, Liz (2003). The foundations of qualitative research. In Jane Ritchie & Jane Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp.1-23). London: Sage.

Stake, Robert E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tolle, Eckhart (2005). *A new earth: Awakening to your life's purpose*. New York: Penguin.

United Nations Development Policy and Analysis Division (2015). *What are least developed countries (LDCs)?,* http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/cdp/ldc_info.shtml [Accessed: June 19, 2016].

Watt, Diane (2007). On becoming a qualitative researcher: The value of reflexivity. *The Qualitative Report*, *12*(1), Art. 5, 82-101, http://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1645&context=tqr [Accessed: June 19, 2016].

Willig, Carla (2001). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Yates, Jim (2011).*Tag archives: Ladder of inference,* https://pivotalthinking.wordpress.com/tag/ladder-of-inference/ [Accessed: June 25, 2017].

Author

Jayne PITARD completed a PhD in 2016 in education at Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia. Her thesis focused on her teaching of a group of students from Timor Leste. She has held various teaching and research positions within Victoria University for the last 27 years.

Contact:

Jayne Pitard

PO Box 386, Toorak, Vic, 3142
Australia

Tel.: +61 418 321198

E-mail: jayne@pitard.com.au

Citation

Pitard, Jayne (2017). A Journey to the Centre of Self: Positioning the Researcher in Autoethnography [27 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *18*(3), Art. 10, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.3.2764.